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ROBERT A. HEATON, JR.

Night Shift

Anna tiptoed carefully into the small kitchen. The soft clip-clop, clip-clop of her slippers betrayed her hurried shuffle as she stepped off the frayed rug in the living room to the bare bleached wood of the kitchen floor. The coffee-pot signalled with its energetic bubbling that it had finished perking. It seemed to Anna to say, “For God’s sake turn me off or I will get so strong and hot that I will splatter your ugly old kitchen!”

Anna laughed to herself as she thought about it. “The pot calling the kettle black, eh Herr Schwarze-pot?” she taunted. “The only reason I keep you around this ugly old kitchen is that you fit it so well with your dents and scratches and burned-up look! And why should you complain anyway? I pulled you out of the ashes on Kirchenstrasse, gave you a new home and feed you real American coffee!” She shook her fist menacingly at the old pot in a mock gesture of reprisal. “So don’t give me your threats, Herr Schwarze-pot, or I will sell you and buy a shiny new one that will not complain so much!”

Anna didn’t have to look at the kitchen to know it was bare and drab. The plaster was cracked and peeling in a thousand places which made the walls and ceiling resemble a huge map of railroad tracks criss-crossing a country. The once sturdy oak table had been charred and weakened from the fire and smoke following one of the one hundred and fifty-four air raids on the battered city of Berlin. Mr. Wernicke, from the apartment downstairs, had re-enforced it and had pronounced it “better than before, by God,” as he greedily eyed the two one-mark coins she took out of her purse and placed in his shaking hand. He had had that “schnaps” look in his eyes and had probably dashed straight to Graeber’s Rathskeller on the Marienplatz as fast as his stubby old legs could carry him. The rest of the kitchen was in an equally poor condition . . . but it was a kitchen . . . more than many people had these days. Why, there was even a bedroom to the apartment and a living room with a rug in it!

A shrill wheezing sound from the neglected coffee-pot reminded her she would be late for work if she didn’t hurry. She quickly removed the pot from the ancient stove to let it cool before pouring a cupful.

The small figure of her daughter, Lisa, appeared in the doorway sleepily rubbing her eyes. She clutched a small ragged doll close to her chest as though, if she were to drop it, someone would snatch it up and she would never see it again. “Mama!” she said. “What was that
noise? Was it the warning siren? Do we have to go to the shelter again?"

"Ah, liebling, liebling. Of course not. It was only Herr Schwarze-pot screaming for help. See, he is boiling mad!" she said mockingly. "Come, Lisa, have a cup with me. We must hurry though. It is almost ten; so I must leave for work soon. And you should be in bed! You must go to school in the morning."

The girl pouted, "I don’t want to go to school. I would rather help you work and make more money for us."

"Lisa! That is no way to talk. We were lucky to find an apartment so near a school. Yes, and we are lucky there is a school still standing for you to go to. Your father would have wanted you to go to school."

She scarcely mentioned her late husband Franz to the child. She scarcely remembered him. He had been dead for six years having probably become fertilizer, along with many of his comrades, for some Russian farmer. Either the cold Russian winter or cold Russian steel had claimed him. She didn’t know which . . . nor did she care. He was dead . . . that was enough. She had seen too much of death and dying during her own private hell in Berlin to feel much remorse at his passing. She only felt a twinge of anger toward him for letting her and Lisa down when she felt she had needed him the most. But that part of her life was over now . . . life is for the living.

"Mama . . . MAMA!" cried Lisa.

"Yes, dear?" she answered, recovering from her tangent of thoughts.

"Are you going to marry him, Mama?"

"Marry who, Lisa?"

"The American . . . Captain Krueger, Are you?"

"Why, I don’t know, Lisa. What makes you think Captain Krueger wants to marry me?"

"I saw the way he looked at you at Frau Kroll’s dinner party; and you’ve been seeing him almost every day this week," the child added.

Anna looked at her daughter and smiled wonderingly. Sometimes she was amazed at the perception of this eight-year-old child. She seemed to be able to grasp a situation in an adult fashion, recognizing and weighing the consequences. Yet, at the same time, she maintained a quality of childlike naivete that set her apart from an adult observer. Anna supposed that this characteristic stemmed from the child’s seeing too much of life too soon . . . the war and everything connected with it. It was strangely comical to watch Lisa as she weighed the pros and cons of a particular decision or situation. It was at these times Anna wondered how much her daughter really knew about her and her "work."

"Mama, you should marry him if you can. A woman needs a man."
“Lisa! What do you know about that?”

“I know,” she said simply, as she stood up, grasped the coffee-pot with both hands and poured herself more coffee. “Want some more?” she taunted.

“No, I have to leave now for work,” said Anna, somewhat abashed by her daughter’s frankness. She stood up, walked over to the closet, took the fairly new American Army overcoat off a hanger and put it on, wrapping it tightly around her. She walked over to where Lisa sat sipping her coffee and said, “Would you like to go to America someday, Lisa?”

“Oh, Mama, that would be wonderful, wonderful!” Lisa, the child, had spoken this time.

“I will do what I can to arrange it, then. But I can promise nothing. As you seem to know, he likes me... whether or not enough to marry me and take us to America... well, only time can tell about that.”

Lisa got up from the table and embraced her mother. “Mama, Ich liebe dich, Ich liebe dich! (I love you, I love you!) When I grow up I want to be just like you!” she exclaimed.

“Maybe you will, liebling.” But not if I can help it, she thought to herself, lazily stroking Lisa’s long blonde hair.

“Well, I have to go now or I’ll be late. So, go straight to bed now. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“All right, Mama, goodnight.”

“Goodnight Lisa,” she said as she opened the door and stepped out into the cool, clear October evening.

The stars shone brightly in the sky and sprinkled with light the rubbled streets of the skeletal city of Berlin. The light from the stars mingled with the makeshift lamps and lanterns of the many workmen who filtered through the rubble clearing a path here, tearing down the remains of a house there, rebuilding... a thousand tasks being done. Berlin was picking up the pieces and was trying to fit them all together again.

As she walked, Anna thought about Captain Krueger. He was a German-born naturalized American citizen. His parents had emigrated when he was a small boy. He had “wangled” a position in the Berlin Occupational Forces because of his ability to speak German fluently. He was happy to be in Berlin because of the many friends and relatives of his family who lived here. Frau Kroll was one of those family friends. He had located her through a search organization and had come directly to see her. Anna had been over talking to Frau Kroll at the time and she had grudgingly introduced Anna to “her dear friend of the family.” “And how were his parents? What was it like in America? You lucky boy... here we have nothing,” and so on.
Frau Kroll wasn’t fooling Anna. Luck had brought her an American friend however distant the relationship. An American meant good coffee, American cigarettes and many other benefits. These things could be sold at black-market prices and enable one to survive for a long time. She had wanted him for herself naturally. After all, the most important thing was survival... for the present anyhow.

But Erich Krueger had other ideas. He was not so interested in digging up old acquaintances and relatives in behalf of his family to be adverse to a friendly relationship with an interesting and fairly pretty younger woman.

When Frau Kroll suggested a small dinner party in his honor (and at practically all his own expense as he had brought all the necessities which Frau Kroll couldn’t obtain and had graciously refused payment for them) he insisted that she invite Anna. Frau Kroll had been backed up against a wall and Anna had enjoyed it tremendously.

The dinner party was a grand success... for Anna especially... much to the chagrin of Frau Kroll. Captain Krueger enjoyed her company and Anna his. He found some excuse to see her every day after the party and she even skipped work a few nights in order to relax and enjoy herself with him. She had sensed, as only women are able to do, that he was falling in love with her. She wondered if she could fan the flame of his new-found love into an intense enough fire for him to want to marry her. She thought she could. She didn’t love him... but she could easily enough... especially if it meant a life in America for Lisa and herself.

As she walked along, she decided she would give up her “work” and her relationship with Gerda. The sooner the better, she thought. I will tell her tonight.

She turned the corner at Berlinerplatz with practiced step and glanced at the familiar building directly in front of her. She was always a bit overwhelmed at the sight of the Berlin Cathedral rising majestically out of the rubble that enveloped it. However, she knew that if she were to approach the church from the side she would see the gutted-out interior of a building that, from the front, looked like it had escaped the bombs unscathed. “You and I are very much alike, old church,” she mused. “We are something entirely different on the inside. But are we to blame for our deception? Not really, I think.”

She continued her familiar course; down Jahnstrasse three blocks; turn left at Wilhelmstrasse; go to the third house from the corner; open the door; go to Gerda’s apartment and knock.

“Where have you been?” exclaimed Gerda. “You’re late tonight. I thought you weren’t coming.”

“I am coming for the last time, Gerda,” Anna replied.

“What? What nonsense is this! This is only the beginning. You can’t stop now.”

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"I can and I must and I will. Tonight is my last night of 'entertaining.' I have enough money to last for awhile. Lisa and I will get along."

"Aha," cried Gerda. "It's that American Officer you told me about. He's asked you to marry him ... is that it?"

"Something like that ... not quite," Anna replied.

"Well, why didn't you say so. By all means become legalized, liebling! I only thought you were getting another wave of conscience." She laughed bitterly. "Come now. Get dressed. You’re going to entertain another Officer tonight. It will be good practice for you if you are going to marry one and leave me to the mercy of all these lustful American males."

As she went into the bedroom to change, she thought about Gerda and their relationship. It had been a very profitable one. She had made plenty of money as a prostitute ... much more than she had dreamed of making at the factory where she had first met Gerda. She generally made more money in one night than she could make in a whole month of back-breaking work in the factory.

It had been difficult at first. She had felt guilty all the time; especially when she looked and talked to Lisa. But she had got over it, mainly because of Gerda’s persuasive arguments and partly in her realization that she and Lisa could live much better with the extra money she earned. Besides, the neighbors knew nothing about her "work." They and Lisa thought she still worked at the factory.

She finished dressing quickly and went out to the living room and Gerda.

"Anna, why do you have to stop seeing other men? Can’t you see your officer during the day and spend your nights in my happy company?"

"Ah, Gerda! You! You don’t understand. All you care about is ‘geld und gemeutlicheit’ ... ‘money and the good time.’ You live for the moment ... I for the future!"

"All right, all right," Gerda said. "You don’t have to preach to me. I know what I’m doing and why. Maybe you are right in what you are doing. Who knows, maybe I’ll snare a handsome American Officer myself! I’ll play the innocent little fraulein led astray by my American lover who was false to me . . . ."

"Shut up, Gerda! I . . . ."

She was interrupted by a knock on the door. Gerda shrugged her shoulders as if to say, "Forget it and act like you’re having a good time," as she walked over to the door and swung it open.

"Major Donnelly," she cried. "How wonderful of you to come. And who is the friend you have brought this evening for Anna?"

"His name is Captain Erich Krueger," said Major Donnelly, casually.